

Chapter 11 - IMPACT OF MERCURY ON TOURISM AND RECREATION IN NJ

A. Introduction

The Task Force was charged to identify the impact of mercury on tourism and recreation in NJ. This is a sizeable task considering the popularity of fishing and the importance of fish as a vector of mercury. Mercury, or any other pollutant, might have a direct impact on a resource by,

1) rendering it unusable, 2) rendering it inaccessible through regulatory restrictions, 3) adherence to advisories reducing fishing or fish consumption, or 4) accurately or inaccurately altering the public's perception of the acceptability of the resource. However, the fact that NJ has taken an aggressive position about issuing fish consumption advisories may also inspire confidence among fishermen and fish consumers.

B. Data and trends in freshwater and marine fishing in NJ

1. Introduction

Freshwater and saltwater fishing are very popular in NJ and contribute substantially to the economy, particularly along the shore. During the past twenty years there have been two countervailing public messages regarding fish consumption emphasizing benefits and risks. The health benefits of fish consumption have generally been emphasized, while issues concerning contaminants in fish have only attracted attention sporadically. There was, however, a great increase in attention to contaminants in fish from November 2000-January 2001 when mercury and related risks from fish consumption were featured on prime time TV news stories.

If people are influenced by such information in deciding whether or not to go fishing, one might expect to see an impact of the information reflected in either an increase or decrease in the number of people fishing in NJ. Several studies cited in the section on Advisories (Vol. II Chapter 9) emphasize that many fisherfolk are unaware of advisories or choose to ignore them. Such data, however, do not identify would-be fishers who chose not to go fishing because of health concerns.

People could react to fish consumption advisories and other information regarding the hazard posed by elevated mercury levels in fish by:

- Remaining unaware
- Being aware but ignoring such information
- Reaching a decision that it is not a problem for them
- Reducing or changing their consumption patterns
- Continuing to fish but catch and release
- Stopping fishing

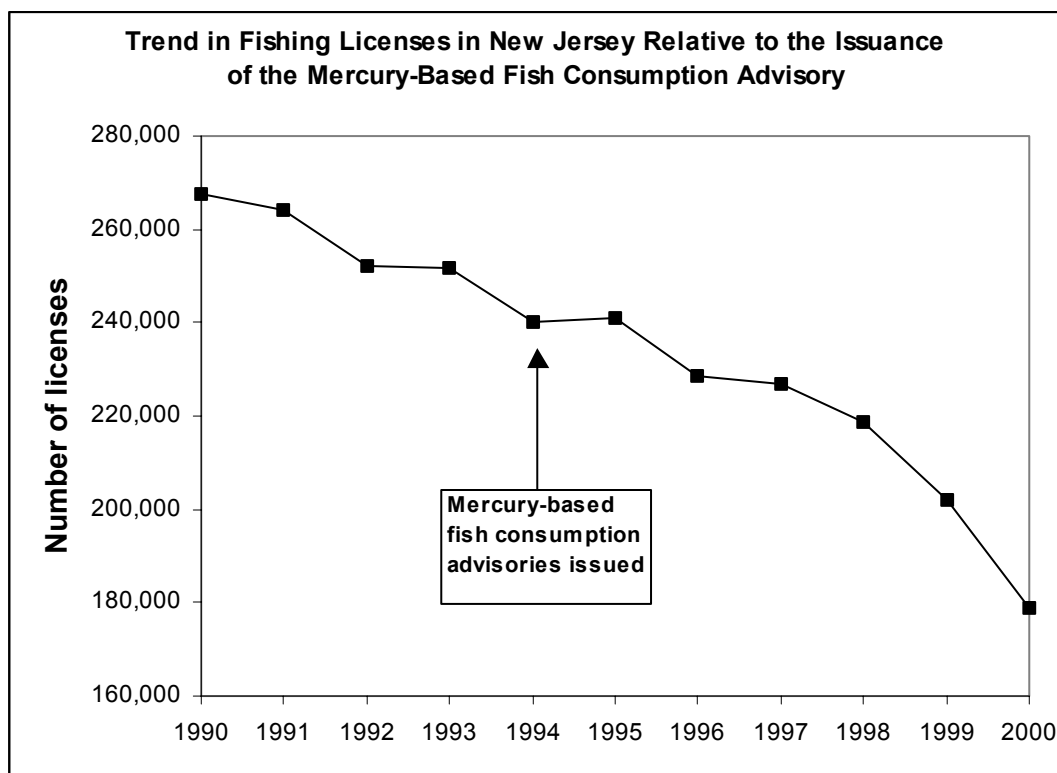
2. Trends in Fishing Licenses and Fishing Statistics

a. Freshwater Licenses

For those people for whom fishing is a long-term hobby it is not likely that they would stop fishing solely on the basis of advisories or word-of-mouth information. On the other hand, novices might choose other hobbies.

To assess the impact of advisories pertaining to freshwater fish on freshwater fishing, the Task Force obtained information on the issuance of resident fishing licenses (freshwater only) for the period 1990-1997 from the NJDEP Division of Fish and Wildlife. At the beginning of the period there were more than a quarter million licenses issued annually (Figure 2.9), but this number has declined to just over 200,000. The decline was already evident by 1991. The arrow shows the time when advisories were issued in 1994. Although the decline in licenses continued, there is no evidence that it was accelerated by the advisories.

Figure 2.9. Trend in Fishing Licenses in New Jersey Relative to the Issuance of the Mercury-Based Fish Consumption Advisory.



Saltwater fishing contributes about \$2 billion annually to the NJ economy, with about 75% coming from recreational fishing. With an estimated 841,000 saltwater anglers, NJ ranks 4th in the nation.

b. Saltwater Fishing Statistics

The NJDEP Bureau of Marine Fisheries provided the Task Force data from the National Marine Fisheries Service, which conducts a variety of surveys on coastal fishing activities. The statistics show a big dip in the number of fishers between 1990 and 1992, and then an increase with a peak in 1994, followed by another decline. It is possible that this second decline which coincided approximately with the issuance of the advisories was related to mercury, even though the advisories were specifically for freshwater fish, and not for saltwater fish. The number of person-days fishing did not show any consistent trend and was essentially flat across the period.

c. Official Opinions

The Task Force sought opinions from several officials who would be likely to know of an impact of advisories on fishing. The following offered their opinions:

Gilbert H. Ewing Jr., Chair, NJ Marine Fisheries Council, August 1999,
“The Council is not aware of any documented information regarding the changes in fishermen behavior as a result of concern for mercury pollution.”

Robert Soldwedel, NJDEP, Chief, Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries, August 1999.
“It is a fact that there has been a continual downward trend in the sale of fishing licenses in NJ, as well as in most of the other states throughout the country. However, it is extremely doubtful that this decline could be tied into the issue of mercury-based fish consumption advisories.”

“Fishermen surveys invariably conclude that very few people are interested in taking fish home to eat. Most of the more dedicated fishermen and those in fishing organizations such as the BASS Federation, Trout Unlimited and Muskies Inc wouldn’t even consider keeping a fish regardless of its size, because they recognize that it’s in the best interest of their future fishing to release all that they catch. Creel censuses have found catch and release rates as high as 95% for Largemouth Bass and Chain Pickerel. ...”

“It has been our perception that the fish consumption advisories for mercury have little impact.”

The above statement regarding catch-and-release refers mainly to fresh water fishing, since interviews of estuarine and coastal fishermen in the Arthur Kill, Raritan Bay, and north Jersey shore, indicated that 61% of 119 people fishing from shore and 94% of those fishing from boats, responded yes to “do you eat fish you catch” (May and Burger 1996).

3. Boat Captain Survey

Although subsistence fishing has been examined extensively, relatively little attention has focused on organized recreational fishing, such as party and charter boats. Yet, in many coastal states, these boats play a major role in recreational fishing, particularly for estuarine and marine fish. For saltwater fish, NJ issues advisories based on PCBs, not on mercury. However, to determine whether the information on mercury toxicity and the advisories might have affected recreational fisheries, a study led by Dr. Joanna Burger of Rutgers University (in collaboration with NJDEP Division of Science, Research and Technology staff) interviewed fishing boat captains on their views (Burger et al., 2001). It must be stressed that this study obtained opinions, and did not try to determine the accuracy of these captains’ opinions.

The interviews of NJ party and charter boat captains asked about (1) knowledge about consumption advisories; (2) current and potential communications about advisories to clients; and (3) perception of whether advisories affect fishing. Additional information collected from boat captains during the interviews (frequency and nature of fishing activities, etc.) appears in a separate report (Burger et al., 2001).

From March through May 2000, 93 captains were interviewed by telephone. This was 40% of the 231 registered boat captains in NJ. Another 40% could not be contacted. All but eight of the remainder was willing to participate, but could not arrange a mutually convenient time to be interviewed before their intense fishing season started at the end of May. Of the respondents, 55% were full-time boat captains. The main fish sought were Flounder/Fluke, Bluefish, Striped Bass, Weakfish, and Tuna. Only a small percentage of trips were for Swordfish and Shark, predatory species that are likely to have high mercury levels.

The vast majority (94%) of respondents said they had heard about fish consumption advisories, but their knowledge of these was mixed. Of the 82 captains who said what they had heard about health warnings on fish, 35% mentioned PCBs (13% linked the contaminant to Striped Bass, particularly in the Hudson River. Bluefish also were often mentioned as contaminated with PCBs); 29% mentioned mercury. Several captains erroneously cited particular contaminants or affected species, or mentioned erroneous problems (e.g., lesions on fish) and solutions (e.g., proper preparation or storage removes contamination). Only six captains cited limits on the amount of certain species that one should eat. Surprisingly, about 23% had not heard of the *NJ Fish and Wildlife Digest*, which is the DEP's primary means of conveying information about advisories to anglers.

As for current communications, only 12% of captains said that they currently posted advisories. Some 82% of captains said that customers were aware of advisories, but many fewer thought customers were aware of the actual content of the advisories (e.g., only 20% thought customers were aware of mercury advice). About half said customers had asked about the safety of fish (9% often, 40% sometimes).

The responses captains reported providing to these customers were diverse. Eight of the captains mentioned specific species to avoid, usually Bluefish and Striped Bass. Others mentioned general guidelines (e.g., it "depends on the species," "size of the fish", or the "amount one eats") or categories. Some answers were conflicting, such as (avoid or eat only "bottom feeders"). Nine captains gave advice on how to prepare fish to avoid problems (e.g., "don't eat the dark meat," "always remove the blood line," "filet and skin") which is accurate for dealing with PCBs, but not mercury. Two captains said this is a problem only if one fishes in other than "clean" water, although water column pollution is not the primary source of fish contamination, and many contaminated fish migrate. Some 19% of all boat captains interviewed said there was no problem with fish safety at all. About a third (37%) of the boat captains said they would post consumption warnings if they were provided by the State; another 21% were not sure, with most of the latter saying it would depend on the advisories' content and presentation. Captains who felt public health warnings had affected their business were not less likely to say they would post advisories than other captains.

Boat captains were asked to rate the importance of various factors in the quality of their fishing seasons. Fishing management regulations, the strength of the overall economy, fishing success of clients, and business costs were all cited by 80% or more captains. Competition from commercial fishing boats and the declining size of available fish were cited by over two-thirds. Some 47% of captains cited "public health advice/warnings about saltwater fish contaminants" as a strong or moderate factors in the quality of their fishing season, ranking it seventh (of 13

factors) in importance. Just under a third (31%) felt advisories affected business strongly. About 36% of the captains reported that former customers had decided to stop fishing, but advisories were not reported as among the reasons given.

Captains who took more trips for Bluefish, Fluke, Sea Bass, and Thresher Shark were somewhat more likely to think that advisories affected their business than did those who did not seek these species very often. Bluefish is the only one of these species that is subject to advisories, in this case for PCBs, and this species has a moderately elevated concentration of mercury. There were no differences for those who took trips for Swordfish, Marlin, Stripped Bass, Tuna, or other Shark species, all species with moderate to high mercury values. Captains who felt advisories were affecting their businesses worked closer to areas (e.g., Raritan Bay Complex and New York Harbor) subject to PCB advisories than did other captains, and were more prone to respond that management regulations (e.g., size, limits, seasons) and marketing and advertising by the industry or State were strong influences on the success of their seasons.

C. Summary and Conclusions: Impact of Mercury on Tourism and Recreation in NJ

Many social and economic factors affect the popularity of any recreational activity. The Task Force found no clear evidence that the issuance of fish advisories or the rising public concern about mercury have had a major influence on freshwater or saltwater fishing. Although the number of fishing licenses has declined, the decline did not coincide with the issuance of advisories. Although concerns over PCBs (through saltwater advisories) may have impacted fishing, these advisories were not based on mercury.

About a third of party and charter boat captains, particularly in northern NJ, reported that advisories did hurt their business to a greater or lesser degree. The Boat Captain Survey was not able to evaluate the accuracy of these reports. Reporting that advisories affected business, however, was consistent mainly for those captains who fished for Bluefish, in the waters of the northern part of the state. It is notable that although bluefish have moderately elevated levels of mercury, there is no mercury-based advisory for Bluefish. There are, however, PCB-based advisories for Bluefish in the waters of northern NJ (i.e., the Harbor Estuary). Furthermore, captains who fished for species with more elevated levels of mercury, species which have been highlighted in the press as posing a potential health hazard (i.e., Shark, Tuna), did tend to identify advisories as affecting their business. This survey cannot rule out a small impact from fish consumption advisories in general on the recreational fishing industry in NJ. It seems unlikely that mercury-based advisories in particular have any major impact on the industry. These results indicate that fish advisories may have had a modest impact on the popularity of saltwater fishing in NJ. However, the incomplete information reported by captains suggests that an outreach campaign to boat captains and improved media reporting should provide accurate information, and should include the brochures already published by NJDEP. This campaign may increase the popularity of catch-and-release activities.

D. Recommendations

Advisories should be timely, requiring periodic monitoring of mercury levels in different kinds of fish that are sought by recreational fishers.

Boat captains should be encouraged to post advisories relevant to their fishing activities and should be provided with advisory handouts that present balanced information.

ACRONYMS

Fg	microgram
ACGIH	American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists
ASMN	Ambient Stream Monitoring Network
ATSDR	Agency for Toxicology and Disease Registry
AVS	Acid volatile sulfide
BBEP	Barneget Bay Estuary Program
BSDW	Bureau of Safe Drinking Water
CF	Concentration Factor
CSFII	Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals
CWS	Community Water Systems
DELEP	Delaware Estuary Program
DFW	Division of Fish and Wildlife
DSRT	Division of Science, Research and Technology
ER-M	Effects Range-Medium
GIS	Geographical Information System
GSI	Gonadsomatic Index
HEP	Harbor Estuary Program
HQ	Hazard Quotient
Kg	Kilogram
LOAEL	Lowest-observed-adverse-effect-level
LSI	Liversomatic Index
MCL	Maximum Contaminant Level
MeHg	Methylmercury
MRL	Minimum Risk Level
NAWQA	National Water Quality Assessment
NERP	National Environmental Research Parks
NESCAUM	Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management
NEWMOA	Northeast Waste Management Officials' Association
NFTDR	National Fish Tissue Data Repository
ng	Nanogram
NHANES	National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey
NJADN	NJ Atmospheric Deposition Network
NJDEP	NJ Department of Environmental Protection
NJDHSS	NJ Department of Health and Senior Services
NJDOH	NJ Department of Health
NJHDG	NJ Harbor Dischargers Group
NJMSC	NJ Marine Sciences Consortium
NMFS	National Marine Fisheries Service
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NOAEL	No-observed-adverse-effect-level
NPL	National Priorities List
NRC	National Research Council
NSCRF	National Study of Chemical Residue
ODES	Ocean Data Evaluation System
PCBs	Polychlorinated biphenyls
PLW	Pompton Lakes Works
PMA	Phenyl mercuric acetate
POET	Point-of-entry-treatment

ppb	Part per billion
ppm	Part per million
ppt	Part per trillion
RELMAP	Regional Langranian Model Air Pollution
R-EMAP	Regional Environmental Monitoring & Assessment Project
RfC	Reference Concentration
RfD	Reference Dose
TEAM	Trace Element Analysis Model
TSC	Tissue Screening Concentrations
US E.P.A.	US Environmental Protection Agency
USFDA	US Federal Drug Administration
USFWS	US Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	United States Geological Survey
WHO	World Health Organization
WQC	Water Quality Criterion
WQS	Water Quality Standard

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